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Decadent Emotions in Finnish Wilderness

Pirjo Lyytikäinen

With Joel Lehtonen (1881–1934), Finnish core decadence moves to rural Finland and to wild, “primitive” nature. His early novels, *Paholaisen viulu* (The Devil’s Violin), *Villi* and *Mataleena*, create an “alternative geography of the imagination”¹ for decadence which leaves behind urban settings, without endorsing the typical nostalgia for rural or exotic paradises.² Lehtonen’s rural decadence employs grotesque-naturalist settings. His recognizably decadent and individualistic heroes, and his style, betray their association with core decadent currents. The agonistic affective atmosphere and characters fraught with transgressive passions initiate what I have elsewhere called Dionysian decadence in Finnish literature. Pathos and mania take over; resignation and analytical coldness disappear.³

In my essay, I focus on Lehtonen’s third novel, *Mataleena* (1905), which is narrated by a poet in search of his roots in a backward region of the Finnish countryside. The novel is rich in descriptions of Finnish people and nature, but the hallucinatory visions of its narrator also play an important role in it. The whole is a combination of grotesque naturalism, decadent fairytales and dream visions, owing much to the tradition Huysmans’s *À rebours* inaugurated, but adding a Nietzschean pathos, along with other late decadent and national, characteristics. The text connects forest wilderness and primitive agrarian life to Dionysian impulses and willfulness, while, in the Finnish literary tradition, depicting life under the yoke of wild natural forces, imaginatively animated as spirits and monsters.⁴ The splenetic tone, spirit against the grain and textual dialog with Huysmans and Baudelaire mix with depictions of violent passions and the

search for an aesthetic form to express this modern primitivism, where creative energy becomes quasi-identical with madness and forces of destruction.

My analysis concentrates on the decadent constellation of emotions and the overall affective atmosphere created by what I call “decadent emotions.” This refers to the paradoxical simultaneity of contradictory emotions felt by the narrator character and evoked by his descriptions of himself, the setting and the other characters. Love is connected to violent hate, joy to gloom, disgust to fascination, mania to depression and melancholia. I explore how the particular atmosphere consisting of a spirit of negation and negative passions and the embracing of a kind of hysteric ecstasy is engendered in Lehtonen’s late decadent work.

From Village to Wilderness: Descent to Hell

Mataleena’s narrator protagonist can be identified with the author (the text is a kind of autofiction before the concept existed). He returns to his home region to meet his mother Mataleena, whom he has not seen since he left his village to be fostered by a bourgeois widow.⁵ He first visits the village where he was born and spent his earliest childhood (already separated from his biological mother who abandoned him right after his birth). To find his mother, however, he has to go into the wilderness surrounding the village. Although the author really made the same kind of journey himself, his odd decadent fairytale takes up autobiographical facts only to distort them: they are the background for a free fantasy about becoming a (decadent) poet.

The novel operates with conflictual emotions and contradictory affective constellations that reflect the protagonist’s divided mind and unstable moods. The narration alternates between eulogies and defamations.⁶ It begins with a eulogy to the vast village (rather a district of scattered farmhouses) on the sunny hills with glimmering waters in the distance, echoing the

nationalist poetry of former decades. The protagonist is introduced as the “happy prince” of fairytales, who visits the happy houses and is given “a glass of soft, clear liquor” to drink and an accordion to play.⁷ But this prince soon descends from these “rich” regions to the “eternal wilderness,” to the dark regions where, in “songless” thickets, the cattle is tortured by gadflies, marsh plants languish in the stench of black mud and rocks like monsters surround the path to the gorges. It is so hot, the sky seems transformed into a furnace; disgusting insects swarm around the wanderer, and the forest becomes like a strange force “sucking empty the feeling heart,” and leaving a dull “gazing” pain (Lehtonen [1905] 1998, 6).⁸

This descent into hell leads to the small and poor tenant farm of the protagonist’s half-brother, where everything is depressing, and the gray shack-like house itself, with its “anguishing black” window-holes like “senseless” blind eyes, personifies the condition of its tortured inhabitants.⁹

The surrounding wilderness is threatening and scornful with its shadowy darkness resembling the forest demons’ eyes, although the narrator adds the adjective “wonderful” to his otherwise gloomy characterization (7).

The living conditions are anything but wonderful and, facing them, even the narrator first foregrounds his pure horror. The description of the half-brother plowing his paltry field intensifies the hellish atmosphere, creating an image of absolute misery. Now the wilderness is said to be “monstrous and agonizing” (9). For the inhabitants, it means back-breaking work; it provokes conflict and crying; it is utter poverty, exhaustion and nakedness. We seem to be in the midst of naturalist horrors. Nevertheless, the description deliberately tends to turn everything into something wonderful and fascinating—for the protagonist. The whole novel is structured around the poet’s ambiguous horror and fascination. The vision of the most disgusting and depressive reality is constantly—almost desperately—affirmed and the horror mixed with a kind

of sublimity: an awful admiration of the devilish force behind suffering and destruction. The wilderness thus becomes an allegory of terrifying and fascinating natural forces and primordial life. A comparison with nature images evoked in Huysmans's *En rade* and elsewhere (see Bernheimer 2002, 65–70 and 73–74) suggests a common theme: the Finnish wilderness is transformed into an allegory for decadent jungles and thickets.

Despite this affiliation, a difference in the affective landscape may be discerned. If we consider disgust—taken broadly to include spleen and ennui and often amalgamating with horror—as a kind of signature emotion for decadence (well justified within the paradigm given to decadence by the founding texts of Baudelaire and Huysmans), it both fits and does not fit Lehtonen's text. Lehtonen is, in a way, turning disgust around in a Nietzschean spirit; passionately accepting what is disgusting.¹⁰ Here, “disgusting” nature (and provocative female sexuality, as we will see), so feared by the weak decadent characters, is passionately embraced. The standard decadent disgust extends to life itself and thus “becomes an agent of a ‘will to decline, at the very least a sign of the most profound affliction, fatigue, sullenness, exhaustion, impoverishment of life’” (Menninghaus 2003, 148).¹¹ But Lehtonen's narrator faces the disgusting with passionate affirmation, embracing its necessity while entertaining no illusions.

The Vetula: Revaluating the Disgusting

The alliance between what is most disgusting and most inspiring is confirmed by the central scene of *Mataleena*, when the abandoned son meets the destitute mother. The fatal meeting takes place after the descent: the protagonist finds his mother Mataleena lying on the straw scattered on the floor of the shack. Her name is a vernacular (and folkloric) name for Mary Magdalene, the biblical repentant sinner, but the woman whom the poet meets does not outwardly remind us of the beautiful figures in religious art. The narrator's quest has led him to a one-eyed human wreck

in rags in the destitute cottage of his uneducated half-brother. She is insane and suffering from a strange nervous disorder. For many years, she has lain agonizing “in the bosom of the eternal wilderness” with no medicine, a constantly aching head and shivering limbs. This barely woman-like creature is but an ugly skeleton, suffering incessant pains, delirious, terrified by her visions of hellfire, tortured by bedbugs and cockroaches (11–12).

This wretched old woman seems to personify the archetype of the disgusting, the *vetula*.¹²

Winfried Menninghaus (2003, 84–91) shows how this antique *topos* pervades aesthetic thought in the eighteenth century and ever since as the antithesis of what is beautiful. The prime example of perfect beauty is an innocent young virgin unblemished by anything rough, wrinkled, folds or, in fact, any real materiality, whereas the old woman with all these blemishes and marks of bodily decay signifies the absolute opposite—the disgusting. To intensify the horror, the *vetula* was most often presented as making sexual advances to young men, representing the ruin of desire. Even in a moral sense, the young woman functions as an emblem of virtue, whereas the old woman, *vetula*, is the witch, evil itself or an emblem of vice.

The aestheticism inherent in decadence retains nostalgia for aesthetic purity while exposing it as an illusion. Decadent male heroes’ spleen is engendered by longing for “disinterested” or “heavenly” ideals while the disgusting reality of sexual desire imposes itself, with all its perversities and “dirty” bodily aspects.¹³ Affected praise of the hideous only reinforces the shock.¹⁴ The emotional effect is heightened by transgressing the expected frames of feeling and by the tensions between opposites. Ernst Robert Curtius (1979, 202) pointed out that what he calls the “harmonies of opposites,” often expressed in oxymorons, “are emotive formulas and as such have especial vitality.” When projected onto the beautiful objects of desire, the disgusting “truth” permits the repeated sadistic (or sadomasochistic) gesture of sullyng the ideal. In

decadent aesthetics, the most provocative but always repeated gesture is to present the ideal of classical beauty with allusions to decay and vice (including sexual desire as such). Baudelaire's "Une Charogne" likens the body of the beloved to a putrefying carcass; Huysmans's *Salomé* is connected to pathological hysteria and "prostitution." This background of philosophical pessimism gives the trope a metaphysical dimension: love and desire create beautiful delusions to hide the fundamental reality of death and decay, as most acutely presented by Arthur Schopenhauer, the godfather of decadent thinking.

How can we connect *Mataleena* and this decadent tropology? In Lehtonen, the constellation is obviously changed by the fact that the central ambivalent figure is the protagonist's mother.¹⁵ To present one's mother as an utterly disgusting old woman, attributing many conventional objects of disgust to her—dirt, insects, rags, illness and extreme poverty—contravenes all conventions idealizing the maternal, although the poet feels compassion and is not abhorred.¹⁶ *Mataleena* as mother also contradicts the ideal mother figure in moral respects: she has abandoned her son born out of wedlock and is reputedly a whore. All this is, however, only one side of the figure. Here, the *vetula* is transformed by the protagonist's tale of her youth, when she was known as a beauty, making the young erotically desirable woman visible. The human wreck seen in the shack thus hides a beautiful, passionate and wild maiden admired by the Dionysian decadent. This "tale of *Mataleena*" is announced early but it first mixes with her son's story. On the same page, he tells his audience: "My tale is wonderful, mine, the happy son's, who wanders like the forest devil's favorite child, for long idle days on the roads of my sunny home village" (13).¹⁷ In fact, he tells his own memories and past and then returns (more than twenty pages later) to the scene of meeting with his mother in the shack. In his augmented description of the old wreck of a woman, he finds new disgusting details that he transforms into wonders and joys. This time, he

narrates part of the dialog with his mother: she begs his forgiveness for abandoning him; he laughs and affirms that “his life will be wonderful” (36). The color red—associated with either passionate love or violent hatred—is conspicuously present in this repetition and continuation of the central scene.¹⁸ The mother’s red skirt complements the reflection of the red sunset that draws a blood-red halo around her head; the sick mother is “like a saint” in the eyes of the son.¹⁹ Only now does he begin the story of her youth. This tale is afterwards characterized as the “lying fairytale of Mataleena” (75): an invention of the summer night spent in the shack.

All in all, the mother embodies the central paradoxes of the text, and her fate prefigures that of her son. She is the sinful Mary Magdalene in whom the son insists on seeing the holy Madonna, combining sin with holiness, like Huysmans’s emblematic Salomé (cf. Hanson 1997, 123–124). The exalted description, surrounding the grotesque figure with positive attributes, presents her as the ambivalent emblem of decadent art. Her motherhood foregrounds questions of heredity, allowing the genealogy of the decadent poet to appear as the central theme. The once-rejected son defiantly recognizes his own fate in the mother, thus turning his back on the bourgeois education and the values of his foster home. In order to identify with her, he needs the fiction of her glorious past of freedom and passion, defying all the rules of her community. She has paid a high price: mental and physical illness, exclusion from her village community as a whore. Yet, her son is proud of her transgressive energy and unyielding affirmation of life, which she supposedly showed in her youth (according to the tale invented by the son!). Her fatal legacy is the blessing of a life of absolute freedom mixed with the curse of early decay and insanity, but the son embraces this imagined heredity with a kind of hysterical exaltation.

Mataleena is, thus, a complex variant of the double image blending female beauty and decay favored by decadence, although she first manifests only the grotesque and disgusting aspects.

Atypically for decadence, the horror and disgust connected to seductive beauty and foregrounded as “truth” in Huysmans and his followers are put aside or sublimated in her case. While Huysmans first presents female beauty and then reveals it to be disgusting, Lehtonen begins with the disgusting only to reveal the ambivalent beauty of life. The disgusting also inspires the poet to an exalted, lyrical style. *Mataleena* affirms or tries to affirm—in both content and style—the beauty and creativity to be attained at the cost of decay and suffering.²⁰ Instead of naturalist interest in realistic presentation of the outside world—let alone the social milieu—the text displays the feeling and fantasies of the narrator, the poet. Even when he describes his empathic reaction to his mother in the wilderness, he focuses on his own painful anxiety and “unfeeling” exhaustion caused by the loneliness there. He projects these sentiments onto his mother and boldly claims that he thus “knows her anguish” (12). One of the surprises of Lehtonen’s text, however, is that this emblem is not enough for the poet: he moves on to describe a mythical mother figure to complement or even replace the real one. We can speculate the reason for this move: the mythical figure can be identified with the beloved and the muse. It also brings the text into more direct dialog with the prototypes of decadence.

Mother and Beloved: The Spirit of Wilderness

In the evening, when the narrator looks out of the shack window at the birch forest in the lingering light of the northern summer night, he sees “the Wonder of the Forest,” also identified with the spirit of the wilderness. This fairytale vision combines elements of vegetal nature with a female figure:

It is a human-like figure in the shadow of the eternal birch trees, it teasingly leans back, its white and strong breasts rise and swell, its nipples glow scarlet red like two wild carnations.

It bends its arms behind its neck and sways its head from side to side so that the hair whispers and rustles like the green sweet-scented birch branches. Its lips are burning red, it laughs. From its eyes the green fire of heat flashes, horribly glowing in the shadows of the forest; the eyes wildly passionate, jubilant, and fierce with wrath and love like the fire in the eyes of a ruddy she-wolf.

(12)²¹

The mother also sees this creature, takes it to be Satan and starts *her* plaintive, mad prayers. The protagonist, instead, recognizes the figure, and describes it with erotic fascination.

The narrator protagonist already knows this creature: he recalls seeing it for the first time the year he finished school. The Wonder is then described again—in the poetically repetitive style of the novel. This second description more strongly emphasizes the fierce and contrary passions that the creature manifests: wild erotic desires, violent hatred and jealousy. The contradictory nature attributed to the creature highlights its ambivalent and mysterious nature, evoking ambivalent and contradictory emotions in the reader. It is ice-cold and burningly hot at the same time. It blesses and curses, cures and poisons. It is also “eternally avenging” (24), a mysterious characterization that is later connected to both the passions of decadents and life itself. She appears even more fiercely sexual than before—like the wildest sexual fantasy of the young man, who is impatient to break all the fetters of bourgeois decency.²²

If the Wonder of the Forest is first shown as the alluring and threatening emblem of nature, when it reappears in the narrative (which is the first sighting in the chronology of the story) it is explicitly given the role of beloved. The protagonist affirms that it was incarnate in a real woman who “almost killed” him (“you all know the woman,” he is telling his “friends” who function as his narratorial audience). At the same time, the Wonder is claimed to be the personification of his

wild soul (24), thus adding a narcissistic aspect to this hallucinatory figure. The Wonder's ambivalence is further accentuated by her double nature as a lethal and vital force: both a spirit of deadly love who tempts him to suicide and the source of a life force, the incarnation of the wilderness. In any case, the protagonist is miles away from the anguish and fear that weak decadents experience when faced with such apparitions. Instead of abject otherness, the Wonder evokes passionate identification; as the personification of his soul, she is identical with him or his ego-ideal. This muse, "anima," and beloved also turns out to be a mother figure.

The ambivalent life-creating force attributed to the Wonder emerges when it is presented as a replacement for the real mother. In the protagonist's vision, it is seen attending his birth with her retinue. The title of the chapter, "The Magi," indicates the biblical Adoration of the Magi as a hypotext, but fairytale elements are mixed in (we are reminded of the birth scene of the Sleeping Beauty with the fairies giving their gifts). By a typical decadent twist, all the magi or fairies are black-winged devils and their presents of equivocal value.²³ This mixture of fairytale and the Christmas story is, in fact, a decadent commonplace: "perversions of the marvelous" are a favorite sport of decadents and whole collections of perverted fairytales appeared, as Jean de Palacio (1993, 51–97) shows.²⁴ The metamorphoses and decadent fates of the fairies in French decadence may be different, but Lehtonen's rewriting of fairytales has similar perverting functions. This depiction also distorts the Adoration into a devilish scene.

During a snowstorm, the monstrous "green-eyed" Wonder enters the miserable shack where Matalena has given birth to her son and begins to suckle the newborn infant. It is acting as his spiritual mother while he is associated with Christ (or Antichrist) in the Adoration scene:

Naked, it approached the bloody bed of torment. Strong and inflamed shivered its groin, its eyes were fiery like a wild cat's, the scarlet lips burned glowing like redcurrants ripening in

the sun, the white breasts swelled and nipples shone like two bright wild carnation flowers. It, the Wonder of the Forest, laughed with its red lips its wild horrifying laugh, it bowed down over me, its bosom smelling bitter and fresh like marsh flowers. It caressed me, it whispered to me.

(68)²⁵

The chorus of black bat-like but “superb” devils, who watch while the Wonder is suckling the child, the poet-to-be, sing their prophecies related to the ambivalent presents they give to him. He will be both extremely strong and utterly weak; warm-hearted and “like a poisonous snake” in his hatred; and his soul will be clear like the blue sky while his reason will be darkened by insanity. His career as a poet is signified by “a golden *kantele*” (a Finnish harp-like instrument associated with poetry) that he receives but which is to “break in his hands.” In the end, the Wonder laughs and adds the aphorism: “The most shining light does not exist without the blackest darkness!” (67–70).²⁶

The macabre Adoration scene imbues the text with agonizing affective ambivalence; curse is accepted as blessing; what is horrifying is sublimated; motherly care is mixed with Satanic, laughing cruelty, and the gifts of the “fairies” announce the decay and insoluble contradiction of passions given to the protagonist. In this description, Baudelairean blasphemous atmosphere meets Nietzschean pathos. The analytical coldness and irony are missing, but this spiritual hysteria expresses the kernel of Lehtonen’s decadence: the combination of the Satanic spirit of negation, exaltation of negative passions and embracing of ecstatic spleen.

This scene also exposes a hidden conflict between and duality of the mother figures; the idol of imagination versus the disgusting, naturalist realities. The birth mother, the destitute Mataleena, is pushed aside in this negative analog of the Adoration. In a sense, the narrator abandons his

biological mother in favor of the more metaphorical mythical figure to define his identity as a Nietzschean decadent. As an allegorical mother figure, the Wonder of the Forest is the generatrix of his writing. This tension indicates the glory and misery of decadence. Matalena, as an emblem of decadence, shows all the horrors of human and material decay, whereas the Wonder of the Forest represents untamed primitive force, and functions as a kind of Mother Nature connected to the cruel, wild and untamed primordial nature of constant change and struggle. The poet's appropriation of the two mother figures is the secret of his writing: together, they allegorically represent his ambivalent poetry, combining Dionysian excess with a clear view of grotesque decay as the ultimate ground of human life. Unlike many weak protagonists of decadent literature, our poet-hero seems to have the energy to appropriate the creative forces symbolized by the female presences in his life. Sterility or impotence do not threaten him—yet. For des Esseintes, as the over-ripe weak fruit of an old civilization, primitive female figures are terrifying and paralyzing, although tempting at the same time. Lehtonen's protagonist, on the contrary, mirrors himself freely in them and identifies with them. He is empowered by his heritage, which marks him as the “Flower of the Wilderness,” the genetic end-product of his family line while he knows that the creative force is contaminated.²⁷ Its power is destructive, not interested in constructing anything. Nietzsche's dream of the men who want to be “destroyers,” who do not know if they even want to build anything fits this pattern (in *We Philologists*, see Laorden 2014, 39).²⁸ The link with Nietzsche's decadent side is tangible. The metaphysical stance that Lehtonen's decadent poet embraces is pessimistic despite the seeming affirmation of life: it emphasizes the eternal return of destruction rather than renewal. This is also the background of his melancholy, alternating between depression and mania.

Hatred and Love: The Company They Keep

Mataleena's son hates weakness and deplores that the local priest had managed to frighten his mother into Christian beliefs, which he also sees as one cause of her early madness (33, 72–74). The weakness comes from the social and cultural sphere, from religion and social institutions (24).²⁹ Weak decadent characters inhabit an utterly different affective mindscape from that of the protagonist narrator, who is in forceful and passionate revolt against institutions, affirming (dangerous) sexuality and bodily love in all its possible cruelty while sharing the weak (cultivated) decadents' loathing of modern bourgeois society. Matthew Potolsky's characterization of this aspect of decadence fits Mataleena quite well: "True to the etymology of the term, decadence deviates from or rejects some norm. It is nihilistic, condemnatory, and destructive, a perverse mirror of the bourgeois individualism it claims to abhor" (Potolsky 2013, 5).

The narrator willingly presents himself as a loiterer, an idler (Lehtonen 1998, 28). When he hears that his mother has been asking about him and is afraid her son might be a miserable tramp, he admits that she is right and confesses proudly that he is a happy drone, not interested in work, money, titles or anything important to the society around him (30). He identifies with all kinds of dregs of society: the drinkers and revelers, the suicidal, thieves and rebels who abandon their cause if they get bored (Cola di Rienzi is mentioned as an example; 30–32). He does not glorify himself with the "aristocratic" features of a dandy but joins the decadents in imagining an unholy community of the marginalized.

The spirit of negation is manifested most shockingly in the last vision (81–90) seen by the protagonist as autumn has come and he prepares to leave the village, now desolate with all signs of decay and colored by "manure-yellow" stubble fields. This hallucination on the night before leaving is the culmination of the defamatory rhetoric directed toward bourgeois society and

Christianity interpreted in a Nietzschean spirit. He sees his mad ancestors with the naked and sexually provocative Wonder and Satan, whose black wings are “oddly shimmering like jewels,” gathered in a Dionysian symposium, drinking wine and singing to him:

They were ghouls, madmen, my family, my kind, who were feasting under the verdant grapes.

They were living and dead, my friends, who celebrated under the vines.

(81)³⁰

These “madmen” hail their descendant as the golden flower of the family, who has been given the “ere long breaking *kantele* of the mad family” and who is willfully and proudly wearing the crown of thorns (82).³¹ They welcome him as “a madman among madmen,” and a “full-blooded pagan” like themselves, declaring that “Self,” or “infinite, unbridled, endless and relentless freedom” is the only god they adore. They present themselves as the “proud, rebellious company of the devil.” Their freedom and pride are seen in a Nietzschean light as the rebellion against the God of “the humble” and “the slaves” (82–83). They respect “no principles” in life, but they clearly abhor everything that is respectable in society and religion (84).

Eloquently, they list everything they love or hate, including the company they keep: the marginal groups they “love.” Besides everyone already mentioned there are many more; prostitutes, prisoners and criminals. The description heightens the former identification with the frenzied ecstasy of a carnival of evil. This has nothing to do with sympathy for the weak. The outcasts are imagined as the most talented and vigorous people who have only gone wrong because of the narrow-mindedness of their surroundings (85).³²

The madmen declare their intention to break all Ten Commandments, to commit all crimes, to be decadents and dilettantes, to willingly destroy everything without caring to build anything on the ruins. They address the pillars of society:

Beware, you old wise uncles who have worked hard and collected money! [...] we are thieves and robbers; the great fortune, that you have, during centuries, collected with sweat and labor and saved as a heritage to us, your property in tempered fear, wisdom, prejudice, and respect for princes, church and society, this precious heritage we will use like thieves and robbers! We will sell it cheap as worthless junk to the firstcomer and spend the money to have madmen's prodigal, free pleasures through our short lives!

(89–90)³³

This Black Sabbath is the last epiphany, the last piece of the horrible and fascinating inheritance that the narrator receives before leaving his home region. He laconically comments about this rage of his “miserable and hateful family” or “his kindred spirits,” and the text ends with a short description of his waiting for the ship to take him away, back to the city.

The “decadent community” thus formed is a truly provocative one and has its antecedents in decadent texts. As Potolsky (2013, 29) observes, Baudelaire uses kinship terms to describe such countercultural communities and to characterize his favorite figures: the *flâneur*, the lesbian, the poet and the dandy.³⁴ But this unholy communality between the ancestors and the outcasts of the society in Lehtonen, this unnatural family of “the hateful kindred spirits” (90), is not ostensibly “bound by artistic affiliation” nor “recasting the republican virtue of universal fraternity,” as Potolsky (2013, 27) describes the fraternity of decadent authors themselves. Lehtonen emphasizes the biological heredity, although the mad family mixes with devils in the

symposium. In Max Nordau's sense, "the notions of his ancestors are alive" for the narrator (Pynsent 1989, 139–140).

Given that everything is a vision and fabulation by the narrator, the last scion and "golden flower" of the family, the imagined community only exists in the poet's head even inside the textual world. Instead of a decadent republic of letters, a community, we finally have the poet alone, his prolific imagination and the chaotic images of his fierce soul. The imaginary communities that the decadents fabricate in their minds are solipsistic.³⁵ The "real" communities exist, instead, in the intertextual networks of decadent texts.

Conclusion

Mataleena ends with the most forceful manifestation of the spirit of negation and subversive passions, preceded and framed by the protagonist's suicidal plans and desire for death, which are not realized, but show that his affirmation of life is performed on a stage of melancholy. A morbid spleen lurks behind even the most ecstatic moments of beauty and joy, mixing openly with the vision of both past and future. The skeleton-like suffering *vetula* spreads her influence—the atmosphere of sickness, madness and decay—over everything. The golden flower, the decadent poet, grows from this unhealthy soil, the bitter bogs shaped by *fin de siècle* pessimism and loss of faith, without the consolation of nostalgia.

The initial "happiness" proclaimed by the "happy prince" and the exaltation of the Nordic summer in its flourishing ends with depressing horrors that provoke a defiant fiction and hysterical affirmation of life. But neither love nor nature bring any real consolation and even love of freedom will result in madness and decay. Passionate hatred of society and church leaves him a splenetic outsider from the modern culture. The contradictory passions constantly affirmed, performed and set up in the fictional world build on "the contradiction between

morbidity and life-affirmation,” which is also observed in Austro-Hungarian decadence (Pynsent 1989, 160–161). All in all, the atmosphere created by the novel is a kind of ecstatic despair—a modern predicament and a powerful version of the late decadent sensibility.

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¹ Cf. Guy Davenport’s book, *The Alternative Geography of the Imagination* (1981).

² Ashley (2000, 176) has described the tendency of symbolist poets and other fin de siècle writers and artists to take a flight to places “far from the modern urban world,” often imagined as rural paradises.

³ Lyytikäinen (1997, 204–220) and Lyytikäinen (2016, 23). The Nietzschean pathos itself could be seen as a characteristic of late decadent currents, whereas earlier decadents and later modernists tended to be inspired by down-playing the emotions or “making emotional verses coldly”—“[Nous] qui faisons des vers émus très froidement”—to quote a line from Paul Verlaine’s metalyric epilogue from *Poèmes saturniens* (Verlaine 1923, 78).

⁴ Finnish folklore, the epic Kalevala, and the works of the founding father of Finnish literature, Aleksis Kivi, provide this background.

⁵ Tarkka (2009, 11–21 and 62–65) has documented the connections to Lehtonen’s life.

⁶ About the role in decadence of these two types of discourses familiar from books on rhetoric, see Potolsky (2013, 7–8).

⁷ This introduces one Leitmotif, the viina, which signifies both spirits (booze) and wine in Lehtonen. On the realistic story level, it always means booze, wine being unknown in the Finnish countryside at the time, but in the vision of a Dionysian feast at the end of the novel it designates wine, and viinaköynnös the vine. In contemporary Finnish, the word only means spirits or booze (wine is viini).

⁸ This adjective (tuijottava in Finnish) is not an idiomatic attribute of pain (tuska) even in the original; though it is motivated there by the assonance and can be understood as a dulling, stupefying pain. All translations from Matalena are mine.

⁹ Here, as elsewhere, Lehtonen's descriptions seem to have affinities with Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," which Lehtonen probably knew at least in translation.

¹⁰ For an account of the conceptions of disgust in and after classicism, including Nietzsche's ambivalent relations to it, see Menninghaus (2003, 51–182).

¹¹ Menninghaus quotes Nietzsche's Birth of Tragedy.

¹² Vetula is the Latin word for "old woman" used in the aesthetic context to refer to the type of disgusting old female already presented in Roman literature (e.g., Horace's Epode XII). This figure became a topos and commonplace in aesthetic treatises and philosophy as a prototype of what is disgusting.

¹³ In Nordic core decadence, repulsion toward sexuality in all its bodily manifestations was particularly expressed in Ola Hansson's *Sensitiva amorosa*.

¹⁴ De Palacio (1993, 34) describes the figure of the old and ugly woman in the decadent perversions of fairytales, concluding: "La substitution definitive de la laideur à la beauté est devenue l'enjeu capital du merveilleux perversi" ("What is at stake in the perverse marvelous is the substitution of beauty by ugliness").

¹⁵ Searching for mothers is not a very common theme in decadence and seems to derive from Lehtonen's own life history. The most revealing thing here is that, contrary to what happens in the novel, the mother who abandoned Lehtonen and whom he met much later in his home village did not receive him well and did not have any warm feelings toward her educated offspring who had, thanks to his foster mother, risen to the "ruling class" against whom most members of the poor rural population were reserved and even hostile.

¹⁶ In Lehtonen's novel, the mechanisms of transforming what is disgusting in a socially shared sense of (or emotional "frame" for) disgust, and of overcoming it, only add to the shock. Menninghaus (2003, 2–5) discusses this process: disgust is culturally learned and natural; like all emotions, it is susceptible to being overcome by other concomitant emotions.

¹⁷ "Taruni on ihmeellinen, minun, onnenpojan, joka käyn kuin metsäpirun lemmityislapsi pitkät päivät joutilaana aurinkoisen synnyinkyläni raiteilla."

¹⁸ Tuan (1990, 25) emphasizes that colors "play an important role in human emotions."

¹⁹ We are reminded of Baudelairean "sunset poetry" and the red haloes in some decadent paintings.

²⁰ That this affirmation of life—like the one professed by Nietzsche—is fraught with contradictions should be obvious by now: it is a mood rather than conviction.

²¹ "Se on ihmisen näköinen olento ikuisten koivujen varjossa, se keikistää selkää, kohoovat valkeat, väkevät povet, nisät paisuvat ja nannit loistavat tulipunaisina kuin ketoneilikan kukat. Se kytkee kätensä niskansa taa ja huiskien heilauttaa päätänsä niin että hiukset suhisevat, kahahtavat kuin vehreät, tuoksuvat koivun lehdet. Huulet ovat tulipunaiset, se nauraa. Sen silmistä vihreää tulena leimahtaa kimmä metsän varjosta hirvittävänä, villin kiihkeänä, riemukkaana, vihaavana, rakastavana kuin kiimaisen naarassuden silmistä."

²² The relationship with decadent female "monsters" is evident; see Lyytikäinen (2016). We recognize the green phosphorous glow and the erotic allure as standard decadent motifs, although vegetal elements here and elsewhere in Lehtonen tend to replace jewelry and other artificial decorative elements. Although the birch trees and the enchanted summer night give it a Nordic flavor, Lehtonen's description of his Wonder of the Forest relates to Huysmans's Flower ("la Fleur") in *À rebours*, which combines a female figure with the strange "syphilitic" plants des Esseintes had bought earlier.

²³ Baudelaire's prose poems "Les Dons des Fées" and "Tentation" from the Spleen de Paris seem to have inspired Lehtonen's descriptions.

²⁴ He mentions decadent fairytales in Th. De Banville's Contes féeriques, C. Mendès's Les Oiseaux bleus and Prosper de Montlover's La Passion du laid, bringing together the events of the nativity and fairytales like that of Sleeping Beauty; De Palacio (1993, 59–63). Their contents, however, are quite different from what we find in Lehtonen.

²⁵ "Se alaston astui verisen piinavuoteen ääreen ja väkevänä, elinkiihkoisena väräsi masmalonsa, leimusivat silmät kuin metsäkissalla, tulipunaiset huulet paloivat hehkuvina niinkuin auringon paahteessa kypsyvät viinamarjatertut, valkeat nisät paisuivat ja nannit loistivat kuin kaksi ketoneilikan hehkuvan heleää kukkaa. Se nauroi punailla huulillaan, metsän Ihme, villiä, kamottavaa nauruaan, se kumartui minun ylitse, sen povi tuoksui kuin suopursun raaka, kitkerä raikkaus. Mua se hyväili ja minulle kuiskutteli."

²⁶ “Ei ole huikaisevinta kirkkautta ilman pilkkoisinta pimeyttä!” An interesting comparison can be made with Baudelaire’s poem “Beatrice,” with its vision of a troop of hostile and ironic demons; with the queen of the speaker’s heart, they laugh at him.

²⁷ The idea of distinguishing literary periods by looking at how the “predictive” vs. “innovative” aspects of time are manifested in them (see Quinones 1985, 7) could be evoked here: Lehtonen’s novel, like many decadent texts (more precisely: their heroes), tends to downplay the innovative while emphasizing the predictive, in the sense of heredity and fatality. Nevertheless, this has nothing to do with the real creativity of the decadent authors themselves.

²⁸ The journal *Le Décadent* outlines its negative program for *Décadisme* by saying that the mission of the decadent’s task is not to found anything, only to destroy. Nevertheless, this destruction is presented as the seed of the new great literature. Pynsent (1989, 140).

²⁹ The protagonist admits that his education has made him weaker: he both fears and loves his true wild nature (Lehtonen 1998, 24).

³⁰ “He olivat haamuja, hulluja, minun sukuani, minun laisiani, jotka vehreiden rypäleiden alla juhlivat. He olivat eläviä ja kuolleita, ystäviäni, jotka viinapuiden varjossa juhlivat.”

Poe’s poem from “The Fall of the House of Usher” seems to function as the main intertext here.

³¹ The characterization of the poet as either “the golden flower” with its roots in the bog or the flower of “the wilderness” with his fragile instrument repeats itself in the text as one of the Leitmotifs of the ballad-like prose.

³² The idea that great criminals resembled great artists, as well as a sensual pleasure derived from crime or the desire to be criminal, is not infrequent in decadent texts. Pynsent (1989, 161).

³³ “Ah, varokaat itseänne sedät vanhat ja viisaat, ahkeroineet ja rahoja koonneet! Sillä me olemme varkaita ja rosvoja myös, sen suuren omaisuuden, jonka te vuosisatoina hikipäin olette koonneet ja ahkeroina, ahnaina, surullisina olette säästäneet meille perinnöksi, sen arvokkaan omaisuutenne hillityssä arkuudessa, viisaudessa, ennakkoluuloissa, ruhtinaiden, kirkon ja yhteiskunnan kunnioittamisessa, sen kalliin perinnön me käytämme kuin varkaat ja rosvot vain! Me myymme sen arvottomana romuna ensimmäiselle eteen sattuvalla polkuhintaan ja rahoilla me pidämme pitkin lyhyttä ikäämme monta hullujen tuhlaavaa, vapaata iloa!”

³⁴ Potolsky refers to William Olmsted who has noted that “Baudelaire’s poetic lists and groups often constitute ‘subversive taxonomies,’ which posit open-ended communities of outsiders and thereby demonstrate the ‘solidarity of a large group whose actual connections may be nonexistent.’”

³⁵ Cf. Potolsky (2013). Pynsent (1989, 160) affirms: “Decadent literature was quintessentially a literature of the imagination, of paradis artificiels which were only rarely created by narcotics.”